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INQUIRING THE CURRICULUM IN
HIGHER EDUCATION

A LIMITED (SOUTH AFRICAN) PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter attempts to explore, in a limited way, the concept of curriculum inquiry and to position its applications within the field of higher education studies and research. Obviously, curriculum inquiry is a particular form of educational research addressing different kinds of educational research questions employed, *inter alia*, to solve pressing educational problems, formulate policies and develop or redevelop programmes and courses. Unfortunately, however, higher education curriculum inquiry is not always performed by educational experts. In fact, curriculum inquiry is mostly attempted by educational practitioners or educational leaders and managers who wish to address a particular curriculum issue in their programmes or courses or solve a particular institutional or systemic problem. As in most research, addressing particular curriculum questions necessitates sound processes and methods of inquiry. This chapter briefly touches on this latter issue, although some of the chapters further in this book will illustrate the point much more clearly. The chapter also attempts to provide some historical or developmental background to curriculum inquiry, including a few glimpses of a vast and relatively uncharted terrain to which the remaining chapters of this book might contribute.

Worldwide, including in South Africa, relevant literature indicates that higher education (HE) curricula have become sites for significant clashes of epistemologies, values and educational priorities. Some see these 'clashes' as threatening, which might result in situations that are arguably more serious than those of financing, organising and governing higher education (Bridges 2000; Griffin 1997; Scott 2008). Others appear to see them mainly as forms of 'incoherence' that can be addressed through appropriate supervisory and regulatory structures (Barnett 1997; Harvey & Knight 1996). What stands out, however, is that higher education curriculum researchers and developers are faced with both practical and theoretical questions as to what selection of knowledge should be represented in higher education programmes and courses and how knowledge might be constructed, facilitated, mediated and learnt.

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In turn, this raises questions as to how knowledge production and distribution should be organised (both institutionally and from the perspective of organising units such as academic departments, faculties or schools) so as to provide most effectively the research, teaching and learning that institutional and programmatic structures can offer and support (Bridges 2000). These are questions that pose opportunities for debate to those who want to engage with them and influence their outcomes. Unlike the school curriculum, which has been almost entirely entrusted to politicians, the university curriculum remains (with the exception of programmes and courses carrying, for example, professional accreditation) self-determined at the departmental, faculty, programmatic and institutional level. However, some would argue that over-emphasised demands for benchmarking, quality assurance procedures and imposing qualification frameworks, as have been seen in South Africa, pose threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Schubert 2008).

It is against this background the term 'curriculum inquiry' is conceived as the thought, study and interpretation used to understand the intellectual and other journeys that shape the perspectives, dispositions, skills and knowledge by which we as humans learn and live. Inquiring higher education curricula therefore implies differentiated methodologies and paradigmatic lenses in order to consider a multitude of questions that have perplexed educators and curriculum inquirers for many years (Schubert 2008; Short 1991); for example, what is worthwhile to study, and why, where, when, how and for whose benefit? Should curricula cater for local or global needs or both and in what balance? Should higher education curricula be guided by national and professional priorities or those of science, technology and academe? Attempts to answer these apparently simple questions imply that curriculum inquiry is a broad terrain within educational research, undertaken by those who seek to define the field of curriculum studies and conduct studies on curricula. Subsequently, there seems to be no single definition of the term 'curriculum' and therefore no single line of curriculum inquiry (Lewy & Goodlad 1991). For the purpose of this chapter an important question that needs to be considered by researchers and students alike is: How does the terrain of curriculum inquiry fit into the broader field of higher education studies and research?

Several important investigations by Teichler (1996, 2005) suggest typical areas of research in four broad categories or spheres of knowledge in higher education, based mainly on research in the European context (also see Bitzer 2009:386). One of these spheres is 'Knowledge and subject-related aspects' which points to different forms of disciplinarity, academic and professional skills and competences, quality of curricula, relationships among curricula, teaching and learning, and more. In his analysis and synthesis of the field of higher education studies and research, Tight (2003, 2004a, 2004b) provides a thematic classification of research domains that includes eight major themes and sub-themes. The three most prominent themes are Course design, which includes the higher education curriculum, Teaching and learning in higher education which points to how students learn and how teachers teach (thus covering different types of content as well as different configurations of higher education curricula), and

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Student experience, referring to the wide range of student learning experiences in higher education.

In the South African context, Bitzer and Wilkinson (2009) identified a typology based on a number of local analyses that is reminiscent of Tight's classification. However, this typology of the field of studies and research in higher education produced two additional themes relevant to South African higher education, namely *Higher education transformation* and *Higher education and socio-cultural links/relationships/responsibilities* [see the list below which is a South African extension of Tight's (2003) classification of broad themes in HE studies and research as proposed by Bitzer and Wilkinson, 2009:394].

1. Teaching and learning
2. Course/curriculum design
3. Student experience
4. Quality
5. System and policy
6. Institutional management
7. Academic work
8. Knowledge
9. *HE transformation in South Africa*
10. *HE and socio-cultural links/relationships/responsibilities*

Both of these emerging themes (i.e. themes 9 and 10, as well as others such as 'Knowledge' and 'Academic work' listed above) have implications for and strongly relate to curriculum inquiry in higher education.¹ An obvious question that might arise is: What has happened and what is currently happening in the field of curriculum inquiry outside of South Africa? In what follows I offer a few glimpses of international literature on curriculum inquiry – primarily that which has been reported since the middle of the previous century and mainly as reported by literature produced in the UK and the USA.

GLIMPSES OF THE NATURE AND CHARACTER OF CURRICULUM INQUIRY IN HIGHER EDUCATION OUTSIDE OF SOUTH AFRICA

If, as Barnett (2009) suggests, the higher education curriculum is understood to be a vehicle that promotes the development of students and is largely built around projects of knowledge. Therefore the issue of how knowledge and student becoming are linked emerges as being extremely important to curriculum researchers. In this sense one

¹ It should be noted that although all the above findings were based on empirical research concerning published work, these typologies do not in any way indicate the current gaps and shortcomings of a research agenda for higher education studies and research in South Africa.

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purpose of curriculum inquiry seems to be how curricula can increasingly better serve student learning. But, as I shall indicate further in this chapter, this is not the only (internationally) accepted purpose of curriculum inquiry.

CURRICULUM INQUIRY IN SCHOOLING

A level of education in which curriculum inquiry has received close attention since the mid-1900s is the schooling sector – particularly in the UK and the USA. Obviously, lessons were and are still being learnt from that level of education. For instance, Posner (2004), promoting a continuous process of curriculum analysis, suggests that the development and setting of standards about what it is that students should learn imply some form of consensus. An analytical inquiry approach therefore requires the participation of a range of experts, including academic specialists, practitioners, educational researchers, members of society and employers. But what happens if these ‘experts’ are in disagreement? Sometimes curriculum researchers and teachers then decide to ignore the experts and use common sense, or to follow the ideas of one authority, or to borrow from a number of experts as long as their ideas work (Posner 2004:4). Obviously, each of these options is fraught with inherent dangers and may lead to risky and uncritical curriculum decisions, tunnel vision [also see Schwab (1962) in this regard], eclecticism or merely ‘bags of tricks’.

Earlier proponents of curriculum inquiry in the schooling environment (e.g. Bloom 1956; Bruner 1960; Kerr 1968; Nicholls & Nicholls 1978; Nisbet 1968; Tyler 1971) saw the purpose of systematic and continuous curriculum inquiry as striving to arrive at answers to four basic questions:

1. What should be the aims and objectives of a curriculum?
2. What should be the content and the methods of a curriculum?
3. How should the achievement of curriculum aims and objectives be assessed?
4. What gained experiences can be fed back into a curriculum?

Such a concept of curriculum inquiry implies no starting or end point to the process of curriculum inquiry. Nicholls and Nicholls (1978) claim that as societies and knowledge production change, learning needs change. Therefore curricula need to change continuously, which seems a valid claim – also for higher education curricula.

Similarly, Goodlad’s (1979:46) contribution to perspectives on curriculum inquiry in schooling emphasised a movement *back to basics* whereby he stressed that nothing is more basic for the study of curricula than to determine what people practise or do, good or bad, right or wrong. What he proposed was that curriculum inquiry should not hurry to arrive at generalisations or theory but rather investigate practices and how they support or run counter to adopted theories. While Goodlad acknowledged the importance of curriculum theory, he also quoted Schwab (1970) who castigated curriculum investigators for the abstract and pseudo-scholarly character of much of their research. One of Goodlad’s most useful contributions to curriculum inquiry was

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(and probably still is) his outline of what he termed the 'process' and the 'substantive' domains of curriculum inquiry. The model he suggested (Goodlad 1979:68) in this regard serves as good example of how curriculum inquiry could be planned and organised at different levels of education, including higher education.

One of the most sustained contributions towards curriculum inquiry is the writings of AV Kelly, who had been publishing on the topic for almost 40 years. Although most of this author's work was located in the schooling environment, many lessons were on offer for inquiring the higher education curriculum. In earlier days Kelly's work was frequently quoted by authors writing on higher education curricula. Kelly's writings reflect different eras in the development of society in the UK and Wales in particular, but in my view the contributions on the role of knowledge in the curriculum stand out as quite useful. For instance, in the fifth edition of *The curriculum: theory and practice* (Kelly 2004) a chapter is devoted to knowledge and the curriculum. Three main points emerged:

1. There are clear linkages between theories of knowledge and views of society.
2. There are implications of these linkages for curriculum planning, policies and practices.
3. There are particular implications imbedded in these linkages for education in a democratic society.

These points closely link to the work of Beyer and Apple (1998:5-6) who foregrounded a number of important issues that confront the serious curriculum inquirer:

- *Epistemological*: What should count as knowledge? What should count as knowing? Is the division into cognitive, affective and psycho-motor knowing too reductionist and do we need a broader view on knowledge as a process?
- *Political*: Who controls the selection and distribution of knowledge and through which institutions?
- *Economic*: How is the control of knowledge linked to the existing and unequal distribution of power, goods and services in society?
- *Ideological*: What knowledge is of most worth? Whose knowledge is it?
- *Technical*: How shall curricular knowledge be made accessible to students?
- *Aesthetic*: How do we link curriculum knowledge to the biography and personal meanings of the student? How do curriculum designers and scholarly teachers act *artfully* in doing this?
- *Ethical*: How are others to be treated responsibly and justly in education? What ideas of moral conduct and community serve as the underpinnings of the ways students and teachers are treated?
- *Historical*: What traditions in the field already exist to help us answer these questions? What other resources do we need to go further?

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Obviously, these issues and questions have much to offer for inquiry into higher education curricula and have indeed stimulated debate and discourse for a long time.² Let us turn now to a few glimpses of curriculum in higher education internationally.

CURRICULUM INQUIRY IN HIGHER EDUCATION ABROAD

In the USA, curriculum inquiry has made substantial progress since the middle of the previous century – in many respects more so than in other parts of the world. Popular publications and perspectives dedicated to curriculum planning and inquiry date back to 1949 with Tyler's *Basic Principles of curriculum and instruction* which highlighted four major areas of curriculum inquiry:

1. What purposes should curricula serve?
2. What learning experiences should be provided to meet these purposes?
3. How is a curriculum to be organised most effectively?
4. How can the outcomes of learning and the attainment of the purposes of the curriculum be best determined?

Taba (1962) furthered Tyler's questions with the argument that curriculum changes signal institutional changes wherein teachers are active participants by inquiring into the goals and objectives for learning. In particular, Taba's seven-step model for scrutinising and developing the university curriculum provided a solid platform for further developments in the domain of curriculum inquiry.

In the late 1960s and 1970s Dressel (1968) and Conrad (1978) proposed an increased emphasis on rational inquiry approaches which acknowledged the earlier seminal works but subsequently drew into the equation issues and questions revolving around curriculum decision-making, political pressures and the role of stakeholders in the curriculum process. In addition, Berquist, Gould and Greenberg (1981) proposed eight curriculum models that reflected the undergraduate experience in universities in the USA. These models generated a range of new curriculum questions to be investigated in a differentiated higher education US system according to particular institutional missions and purposes. A typology developed by Berquist *et al* (1981) was drawn upon by other authors (e.g. Conrad & Pratt 1993; Stark & Lattuca 1997) and foregrounded more curricular variables as well as the role of the academic disciplines in curricula. It also appeared that in the 1980s several curriculum researchers (e.g. Bruffee 1993; Tierney 1989) started investigating questions about students as active participants in their learning and assessment experiences.

One publication that sparked much discussion, debate and inquiry into curricula in higher education in the US at the time was Bloom's (1987) *The closing of the American mind*, which pointed to how higher education had failed democracy and impoverished student learning. Also, the 'liberal curriculum' became a constant topic

² Some of these curriculum issues are also reflected in chapters that follow in this book.

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for discussion and inquiry in higher education as the proponents of the humanities curriculum continued to exert influence in this regard (for instance, see Bennet 1995; Kerr 1994). Therefore, new perspectives emerged, one being that the curriculum is to be observed as a 'living' entity and not merely a plan of learning events or activities. Questions related to cognitive and social constructivism became much more prominent in writings (e.g. Baxter Magolda 1999; Ropers-Huilman 1998), while student diversity and increases in student participation rates were cited by authors such as Nelson (1996) as major factors in curriculum investigation. These issues, together with rapid increases in knowledge and knowledge production, also brought into play the question of the lifelong learning curriculum and a more holistic view of influences affecting the learning paths of individuals (Claxton 1999; Grimes 1995). Before turning to some particular curriculum issues under inquiry elsewhere the reader might ask about the methods of inquiry used in the studies mentioned.

It seems that the range of methods that were used in curriculum inquiry in the past as well as those that are currently in use is wide. One useful source to consult is the latest *Encyclopedia of Curriculum Studies* (Kridel 2010) which outlines, in alphabetical order, a broad spectrum of these methods of inquiry. A list appears below of some of these methods which can be related to the research referred to above.³ For more details on each of these methods or on the full range as published in *Encyclopedia of Curriculum Studies*, the reader is referred to Kridel (2010), Volume 1.

- Action research
- Biographical studies
- Case studies
- Comparative case studies
- Complementary methods research
- Critical theory research
- Documentary research
- Ethnographic studies
- Grounded theory research
- Hermeneutic inquiry
- Historical research
- Indigenous research
- International research
- Mixed methods research
- Narrative research
- Phenomenological research

³ Some of these methods will also be highlighted by the chapters contained in the latter part of this book.

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- Political research
- Quasi-experimental research
- Social context research
- Survey research

A further useful source which does not relate directly to curriculum inquiry in higher education but might be worthwhile to take note of from a methodological perspective is Short's publication, *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry*. Short (1991) outlines a number of methods for curriculum inquiry in the context of schooling and several of the authors in his book offer a number of methodological options to research different types of problems and questions related to curricula. Also, more recently, Pinar (2010:83) has suggested a multi-dimensional, four-quadrant model based on different actors and actions to inquire into curricula. This model can be used in different ways for different purposes ranging from charting the field of curriculum studies to conducting single curriculum inquiry projects.

Following an analysis of the undergraduate curriculum in UK higher education by Squires (1990), Middlehurst and Barnett (1994) contributed an important chapter on the organisation of knowledge and the academic culture. As a most useful example of inquiry into the curriculum question of whether disciplines and subjects in universities in the UK still occupy the heartland of academic life, the chapter analysed the forces and pressures causing fundamental changes in how the disciplines and subject areas were being viewed at the time. In their analysis, Middlehurst and Barnett came to the conclusion that at the end of the previous century the relationship between disciplines, universities and society no longer seemed appropriate due to a number of converging forces which were (and still are) causing fundamental changes to how knowledge is organised within the academic culture. Consequently, since 1994 and not only in the UK, a range of publications appeared which deepened and broadened the argument of inter-, cross- and multidisciplinary approaches to organising knowledge and solving problems within and beyond higher education (Barnett 2000; Brew 2006; Kreber 2009; Rowland 2006).

Another important development in the UK that might have contributed to curriculum inquiry in higher education on a broad front was (and still is) the Higher Education Academy. With a vision of students in UK higher education to enjoy the highest quality learning experience in the world (The Higher Education Academy 2010), the Academy currently supports higher education institutions with 24 subject centres, guidance on educational research, evidence-informed approaches to educational enhancement and sharing and disseminating best educational practices. By working with individual academics, providing access to professional recognition as well as networking and development opportunities and recognising distinctive policy contexts and priorities, the Academy promotes curriculum inquiry of various sorts.

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In Australia, professional development and curriculum inquiry have also increasingly received much attention. For example, an area of curriculum inquiry emphasised lately is the question of how learning can, where applicable, best be integrated in workplace contexts. Recently, one volume of *Higher Education and Research and Development* (HERD) in Australia (Vol. 29 No. 25 of 2010) was dedicated to the issue of work-integrated learning addressing emerging interesting and important perspectives such as institutional involvement in workplace learning, work-ready professional graduate attributes, internationalising work-integrated learning, community-based student placement programmes and balancing student learning and commercial outcomes in the workplace. I conclude this section with references to two further curriculum issues that sparked inquiry: the Bologna process in Europe and researching postgraduate curricula.

At the macro policy level the Bologna process in Europe had major implications for national and institutional higher education curricula (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation 2005). To some it came as a constraint with the division of higher education studies in three main cycles: the three-year bachelor's, followed by the two-year master's and the three-year doctoral degree respectively. However, Charlier and Croché (2009) point out that reality is much more complex and the implementation of the Bologna agreement calls for interdependent institutions whereas most institutions previously had to comply with their own respective national constraints. The new dispensation calls for a wide range of issues concerning curriculum inquiry and some see potential for stronger interdependence across national borders, including stronger relations and exchange with higher education in Africa (Charlier & Croché 2009:39). This provides new opportunities for curriculum inquiry – both in Europe and Africa – on issues such as curriculum relevance, curriculum quality and curriculum outcomes.

In some respects, the postgraduate curriculum is a topic that has already been well explored. For example, in their overview of the (post)graduate curriculum in higher education in *The Encyclopedia of Higher Education* (Volume 3), Conrad and Millar (1992) take a historical perspective on the postgraduate curriculum and its development from the time when the University of Bologna conferred the first doctoral degree in the 12th century. Since those early days, as the authors aptly point out, postgraduate education has become an important part of higher education in many countries throughout the world – at first through instructional forms and later through instruction and research. Still later, postgraduate education was mainly associated with research. However, it is widely agreed that through the ages postgraduate education, particularly at the master's and doctoral level, has played a prominent role in countries with systems of higher education and significantly contributed to leadership in the scientific, economic, social, educational and political spheres. Moreover, research activity associated with the postgraduate curriculum is a valuable source of new knowledge and innovation in many parts of the world. It therefore appears not to be uncommon that students' and institutions' expectations of postgraduate education change over time.

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For instance, to strike a healthy balance between freedom and neglect is a constant challenge (Mackinnon 2004; Manathunga 2005) – both to postgraduate supervisors and students. It is therefore necessary that the level and amount of support provided to postgraduate education be constantly monitored and adjusted (also see the chapter by Grant in this volume). For instance, how supervisors participate in and contribute to development opportunities for postgraduates are important institutional research functions in promoting the quality of supervision practices, as indicated by several studies. It might also be relevant to South African higher education curriculum inquiry.

Let us now turn to curriculum inquiry in higher education in South Africa. As stated earlier, it seems far from easy to provide a full picture of developments in this regard within the confines of a book chapter. The reader therefore has to bear with another few glimpses as allowed by an inspection of relevant literature.

CURRICULUM INQUIRY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE PERSPECTIVE

Quite recently Le Grange (2006) pointed out that inquiry into and debate on curriculum in higher education in South Africa has long been neglected. This viewpoint is confirmed when one tries to find literature on the issue which is, to say the least, rather sparse, incoherent and diverse in nature.

This section points to at least three developments: (1) Literature dealing with curricula in higher education prior to 1994 consisted mainly of questions related to the 'how' of curricula; in other words, predominantly technical-rational issues. Of course there were exceptions to this trend. (2) However, from just before the 1990s up to about 2000, literature reflected new higher education policies and some debate and discussion around these new policies and initiatives. Most of these debates and published viewpoints had to do with issues such as how curricula should reflect the new democratic dispensation in the country and how curriculum development could be more responsive towards the new priorities of an emerging democratic state. (3) Related mainly to the period after 2000, debates and inquiry tilted towards how higher education curricula could embrace and reflect the education and development needs of the country and provided a more critical look at the theoretical and philosophical bases of curricula. This post-2000 'era of inquiry' (if one could call it that) was sparked by, amongst other things, a vehement debate around the outcomes-based education (OBE) philosophy. This philosophy (which assumed ideological proportions in South Africa) was not only forced upon the schooling sector, but spilled over into the domain of higher education.

CURRICULUM INQUIRY PRIOR TO THE 1990S

Although it seemed, as I shall shortly point out, that curriculum inquiry was strongly dominated in South Africa by technical-rational views prior to 1994, there were laudable exceptions. An example of one of these exceptions was the very first article that appeared in the *South African Journal of Higher Education* (SAJHE) in 1987.

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In this article Alan Behr from the then University of Durban-Westville (reserved for students of Indian origin) pointed towards the chasm that had arisen in South African higher education resulting from the then National Party government's policy of creating separate ethnic universities and learning programmes in the 1960s and 1970s (Extension of the University Education Act or Act 45 of 1959). Although this policy was amended in 1983 (Act 83 of 1983) to make universities more accessible to all groups of students, it created a new problem, namely that of growing numbers of academically disadvantaged students in higher education programmes (Behr 1987:3). Behr also pointed out that the academic boycott of the 1980s had devastating effects on higher education curricula due to the unavailability of open international exchange, literature and debate.

Another exception to a technical-rational approach to curricula was the establishment of the so-called Kenton Education Association. This association was started in 1974 by a group of deans of Education from liberal South African English-language universities, who met at a seaside resort called Kenton-on-Sea in the Eastern Cape (hence the name). The Kenton Education Association is an interdisciplinary community comprising academics and postgraduate students engaged in research in education. The Association committed itself to promoting research through a culture of vigorous interdisciplinary exploration, debate, and critique of contemporary research in education in South Africa, which included issues of higher education curricula. These debates focused on conceptual or methodological aspects of research, and research findings. They also explored the significance of these for addressing problems in South African education. In a sense the aim was to 'trouble' taken-for-granted ways of thinking about and addressing educational issues and problems to promote rigorous research and development of education in South Africa. Some of these debates were published in the *Kenton Journal of Education* (<http://www.kea.org.za/ojs/>) which had its first edition in 1975.

A further exception to the technical-rational approach was a substantial body of literature associated with educational transformation, epistemological access and direct student support. This literature was published from 1988 to 1994 in the *South African Journal of Higher Education, Academic Development* (a journal no longer in existence), conference proceedings of the South African Association of Academic Development (SAAAD – the precursor of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa) and various in-house publications, most notably the *AD Dialogues* series published by the University of the Western Cape. This body of literature was broad-ranging in nature, recording best practice examples of how to 'fix the student', how to facilitate curriculum change across an institution, and debates on what constitutes educational disadvantage

If the majority of books and journal articles published on higher education curricula before 1994 are taken into account, it seems clear that much was written and published on how to change and improve higher education curricula without necessarily

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questioning and investigating the educational theories and debates that underpinned these curricula. One could say that a pragmatic approach, linked to technical-rational views of curriculum development and largely imported from the UK, the USA and the Netherlands, dominated curriculum inquiry in some higher education institutions. A few examples might suffice.

Articles published in the first 10 volumes of the *South African Journal of Higher Education* for the period 1987 to 1997 was indexed by Adey (1997), and for this period a total of 44 articles related to curriculum in higher education were published by this journal. On inspection of these articles it appears that a large number of them (I would say at least seventy to eighty per cent) dealt with *how to* issues rather than *why* issues. The use of input-output matrices in evaluating professional curricula (Samson 1987), criteria and procedures for the evaluation of computer-assisted learning programmes (Boshoff 1989) and the relationship between higher education and economic development in the so-called homelands of South Africa (Tötemeyer 1989) was typical of the articles that were published. Many of these articles were based on survey designs of the empirical-analytical type. In addition, a number of manuals or handbooks for university lecturers (mainly at the then so-called historically Afrikaans universities) were published to assist them with constructing curricula and improving the facilitation of these curricula. Examples are Strydom and Helm (1981), Calitz, Du Plessis and Steyn (1982) and Du Plessis (1993). Although quite comprehensive in nature, these publications rested heavily on technical-rational models and authors such as Tyler (1971), Davies (1976), Zais (1976), Wheeler (1979) and Krüger (1980). These publications were complemented by in-house university teaching and learning bulletins and newsletters at different institutions. The broader curriculum picture was, however, heavily shaded by utilitarian motives or what Clegg (2007:1) refers to as “what works”.

CURRICULUM INQUIRY DURING THE 1990S AND BEYOND

During the first part of the 1990s the turmoil and euphoria of the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa prevailed. This was also demonstrated in the higher education arena where a plethora of new policy documents emerged and fierce policy debates ensued until 2000 and beyond. Table 1 briefly depicts the situation which also involved discussions and developments regarding the higher education curriculum as a newly discovered field of investigation.

CHAPTER 1 • INQUIRING THE CURRICULUM IN HIGHER EDUCATION**TABLE 1.1** A summary of key higher education policy and publication initiatives at a national level (1990-2009) related to curricula in higher education

Date	Initiative or process
1990	The National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC) started HE policy proposals in view of the African National Congress (ANC) gaining political power.
1992-1994	Policy proposals were put forward by the Union of Democratic University Staff Associations (UDUSA) and the Education Policy Unit (EPU) at the University of the Western Cape. Publication of the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI) report: Post-secondary Education.
1995-1996	The South African Qualifications Authority Act (No. 58 of 1995) was promulgated. The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) was established. The report: A framework for transformation (1996) was published.
1997	The Green Paper and White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education were published. The Bill on Higher Education was released and the Higher Education Act, No. 101 of 1997 adopted. All HE qualifications were required to be recorded and registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Extensive curriculum restructuring took place.
1998	The Council on Higher Education (CHE) and its standing committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) were established. Ministry initiatives around private HE commenced. HE qualifications had to be accredited on the NQF and the work of the HEQC started.
1999	The National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NASFAS) was established. Initiatives commenced to launch the accreditation process of 50 MBA programmes at 24 institutions.
2000	The CHE report was passed: Towards a new higher education landscape: Meeting the equity, quality and social development imperatives of South Africa in the twenty-first century. A group was appointed to report on language policy for HE, including the use of Afrikaans as language of instruction. The technikon qualifications quality assurance body (SERTEC) and the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) were evaluated by the CHE.
2001	The National Working Group (NGW) released the report: The restructuring of the higher education system in South Africa. Cabinet approved ministry proposals to reduce 36 public institutions to 23 through mergers and incorporations. All teachers' training colleges were to be incorporated into universities' faculties of education. It was proposed that all technikons become universities of technology through mergers and transformational measures. Initiatives commenced to review co-operative governance in HE.
2002	The ministry requested the Council on Higher Education (CHE) to investigate distance education provision in South Africa. The CHE released a research report: Governance in South African higher education and a policy report: Promoting good governance in South African higher education.
2003	The CHE provided advice to the ministry on an interdependent National Qualifications Framework (NQF), also including higher education.
2004	The CHE produced several publications, including South African higher education in the first decade of democracy, Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF – draft for discussion), Higher education and social transformation – a South African case study, as well as a publication on curriculum responsiveness: Curriculum responsiveness: case studies in higher education (2004).

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Date	Initiative or process
2005-2007	The CHE produced several publications and advisory documents, including Towards a framework for quality promotion and capacity development in education (2005), Academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability in higher education (2006), Higher education monitor: A case for improving teaching and learning in South African higher education (2007) and the HEQC evaluative study of institutional audits in 2006 (2007). Higher Education South Africa (HESA) released a report on knowledge creation: Spirit of inquiry: knowledge creation in South African higher education (2006).
2008	The Higher Education Amendment Bill was published to make provision for the implementation of the HEQF in HE institutions in South Africa.
2009	The CHE published a report on Postgraduate studies in South Africa: A statistical profile.

Adapted from Cloete *et al* 2004: *National policy and a regional response in South African higher education* and published in Bitzer (2009).⁴

The aim here is not to highlight the debates and inquiries that followed the policy changes in higher education curricula. For such a purpose the reader is referred to the work of Ensor (2002) and others who did some analytical work on South African higher education policies that emerged in the 1990s and their implementation. Apart from the debates around the notions of Mode1 – Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons 1998; Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott & Trow 1994), the ANC's (1994) policy framework for education and training, the White Paper on Education and Training (RSA DoE 1995) as well as the continuing debate about the Bernsteinian influence in pre- and post-apartheid higher education curricula (Bernstein 1990, 1993, 1994), several South African publications saw the light of day. Examples include reports on inquiries regarding knowledge identity and curriculum transformation (Cloete, Muller, Makgoba & Ekong 1997), the issue of a whole qualifications and/or unit standardised approach (Cooke & Naidoo 1998), the possible end of the higher education binary divide between universities and technikons (Genis 1999; Gevers 1998) and the possibility of introducing an outcomes-based education philosophy across the education spectrum in South Africa (Christie 1999).

CURRICULUM INQUIRY – PARTICULARLY SINCE 2000

It appears that South African literature regarding curriculum formation, development and inquiry proliferated after the late 1990s and early 2000s. One of the first extensive documents to be published on curriculum restructuring in a post-apartheid South Africa was contributed by Breier (2001). In this document, she and her co-authors outlined issues such as international and local curriculum debates, the implications of curriculum change for administrative, financial and academic systems in higher education (Ogude 2001), programme planning (Ensor 2001) and qualifications

⁴ One of the latest additions to the list is the 2011 publication of the CHE on the HEQC reviews of programmes in Faculties of Education across South Africa.

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reform (Kraak & Mahomed 2001). A number of key themes and associated questions were explored (see Table 1.2) which provided, particularly at the institutional and programmatic levels, key points of departure and debate related to curriculum inquiry.

TABLE 1.2 International concerns in South African higher education curricula and associated questions (adapted from Breier 2001:2)

International concerns	Associated curriculum issues or sample questions
Globalisation, massification and internationalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What kind of curriculum would prepare students for participating in a global economy? ▪ How should curricula accommodate the effects of massification and changes in student populations? ▪ How should quality in the curriculum be ensured while many students are from educationally deprived backgrounds?
Responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent should the curriculum be responsive to the needs of the economy, the development of society at large and communities in particular?
Different forms of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How should curricula reflect knowledge traditionally regarded as non-academic, non-professional, local or indigenous? ▪ How should curricula address the challenge of knowledge production where knowledge is increasingly being produced in the site of application rather than in an institution?
Disciplinarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Should the curriculum promote traditional disciplines, inter-disciplinarity or trans-disciplinarity?
Lifelong learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Continuous retraining and re-skilling seem to be increasingly needed in view of changing employment and other needs. How would curricula address these needs?
Graduateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What skills and forms of knowledge do employers and society value? How generic and how specific should the development of these skills be?
Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What kind of citizen is envisaged and how can curricula be instrumental in this regard? How compatible is global citizenship with national identity formation and what is the role of higher education curricula in this regard?
Freedom and accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How should curricula reflect the intricate relationship between institutional autonomy, academic freedom and public accountability?
Distance education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are the implications for higher education in view of increasingly popular distance modes of delivery? What can and what cannot be promoted in a distance education curriculum?
Information and communication technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How can higher education curricula and in particular the facilitation of learning be promoted by emerging technologies? What potential is there for applications in a country such as South Africa with its limited resources and great distances?

Inquiry into the curricula of different fields of study and work also proliferated after 2000, particularly following the merging of several higher education institutions in South Africa and the end of the university-technikon divide. A brief survey of articles published in the *South African Journal of Higher Education* as well as conference and other presentations show investigations and the rethinking of curricula in different

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fields, at different institutions and at different levels of the curriculum. For instance, the curriculum in comprehensive universities (Blunt 2005), in Marketing (Bevan-Dye & Venter 2008), in Business Management Studies (Erasmus & Loedolff 2005), Science Education (Le Grange 2008), History (Shay 2009), Africanisation and contextualisation of the curriculum (Botha 2007; Luckett 2010), community engagement (Bender 2008), the implications of higher education qualification frameworks (Higgs & Keevy 2009; Van Koller 2010), and many more.

One area of inquiry that seems to be a continuous and pressing one in developing countries such as South Africa is the alignment of the school curriculum, the further education and training (FET) curriculum and the higher education curriculum. Although these sectors all have different aims and goals, they have one thing in common and that is to provide graduates to support an emerging democracy and a growing economy within a sustainable financial framework. This area of curriculum inquiry has received some, but not sufficient, attention due to its complexities and scope. One study that stands out for me was sponsored by the Human Sciences Research Council on knowledge, curriculum and qualifications in the FET curriculum (Young & Gamble 2006). Although the study focuses mainly on the FET curriculum in meeting the needs of economic growth and employment, it also touches on the senior schooling curriculum and higher education, indicating not only the differences but also the links in the complex maze of qualifications and skills in the quest to meet current and new employment opportunities – one of the most pressing problems not only in South Africa but also in many other parts of the world. Taking a critical stance, this publication shows that as societies change, education changes. It also draws attention to what happens if the features of education that are distinctive to it are neglected or given a secondary place to the commodification of knowledge (Young & Gamble 2006:5).

Another important contribution towards curriculum inquiry in higher education in South Africa points towards contesting discourses in curriculum restructuring. Some authors (such as Ensor 2004) have indicated how efforts to reshape higher education curricula reflected the responses of universities to the series of policy initiatives after the mid-1990s. Pressures of globalisation and local challenges to reconstruction provided a context where two prominent discourses, a credit-transfer-and-accumulation discourse and a disciplinary discourse, shaped education policy making and the responses of science and humanities at universities. These contributions link well with Muller's exploration of coherence in the curriculum (Muller 2009) and Le Grange's (2006) observation that although universities enjoy much freedom and self-regulation in curricula, there is some danger when curriculum becomes the private domain of the individual department or academic. Le Grange (2006:191) advocates for a greater sensitivity towards the needs of epistemological access to diverse bodies of students, adhering to public accountability and debate about the implications of programme approaches to curricula in higher education.

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From the perspective of the curriculum as an institution in higher education, Jansen (2009) argues that more inquiry and action is needed in South African universities towards non-racial and non-dominant (by one group) curricula. He believes (2009:123) that to transform the lived curriculum in a post-apartheid South Africa and to change what students and academics believe about race, identity and knowledge is vastly challenging. According to Jansen constant inquiry and intervention are needed to unravel and change the misconceptions and ignorance of the sensitivities surrounding stereotypes in and beyond the curriculum. Similarly, Botha (2009) points to the complexities that offer rich opportunities for inquiry in the South African higher education curriculum. She established six interrelated clusters of curriculum issues that are in need of inquiry and suggests a matrix of 'enmeshed' curriculum issues relevant to the South African higher education environment (Botha 2009:178).

One may well ask: How much of what has been discussed above holds implications for curriculum inquiry in higher education South Africa at present and what possible lessons are to be learnt? The next section may provide a few pointers in this regard.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM INQUIRY IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION⁵

The aim of this chapter is obviously not to unravel the concept 'the curriculum' or to provide an overview of how to inquire into higher education curricula. Rather, it provides a view on a limited number of studies and perspectives that have emerged from curriculum inquiry studies internationally, but mainly in South Africa. This chapter thus serves as a brief background for the rest of the book in which a number of cases from various disciplines or fields of study are highlighted as examples of projects inquiring the curriculum in higher education. What then can be learnt from what was said in this chapter on curriculum inquiry in schooling, in higher education contexts abroad and in those in South Africa?

Curriculum inquiry in schooling has reached a considerable level of sophistication. The point is proven by an array of publications on curriculum inquiry that have appeared in the last decade or so. But the question remains what higher education curriculum researchers can learn from these inquiries. At least five of these 'lessons' might be more or less useful:

- Systematic and continuous inquiry seems essential to keep curricula relevant and effective. Such inquiry should incorporate multiple inputs and perspectives, not only those from individual teachers or subject specialists.
- Basic questions of inquiry posed by earlier curriculum researchers still remain important and relevant within new social and educational contexts and at different levels of curriculum inquiry. Therefore these questions need to be revisited from time to time.

⁵ The reader might be able to trace some of these implications to the chapters that follow later in this book.

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- Societal change implies curriculum change. This seems to be true not only for curricula in schooling but also for curricula in higher education – particularly in the human and social sciences and the professional fields, but also in the application of knowledge and skills in the pure or hard sciences.
- Informed use of educational theories seems useful for testing and contesting curriculum practices. Curriculum researchers therefore do not only need to be aware of these theories but should actually use and apply them in their inquiries.
- Those who are serious about effective curricula and their continuous development need to take cognisance of the epistemological, ontological, political, economic, ideological, technical, aesthetic, ethical and historical contexts of curricula to enhance curriculum renewal and improvement.

Curriculum inquiry in higher education abroad equally presents a number of useful lessons to those curriculum researchers in South African universities who have to deal with the realities of transformation and change. The following points seem to be important:

- Curriculum inquiry initially focused on individual courses or subjects but gradually expanded to include other levels of decision making in institutional and national contexts – particularly at the undergraduate level of studies.
- The role of the disciplines and curriculum content featured prominently at first, but increasingly the student as learner, active student participation in learning, the involvement of students in the enacted curriculum (e.g. through problem-based and work-integrated learning) as well as inter-, cross-, multi- and trans-disciplinary curricula have increasingly come into focus.
- The liberal curriculum and the generic attributes it represents remain an important curriculum issue for inquiry. Also, the massification of higher education, student diversity, lifelong learning and workplace-integrated learning has posed challenges to curricula and curriculum inquiry.
- At the level of the methodology of curriculum inquiry a wide range of methods reportedly were and are still being used. Small-scale case-study types of inquiry have been extended by more large-scale survey types of inquiry, many at a national level.
- In some countries such as the UK national initiatives to promote critical inquiry into curricula were established and teaching and learning networks as well as grants for educational inquiry provided support to enhance best practices and innovation. A number of other countries (such as Australia and New Zealand) followed suit.
- The Bologna process in Europe provided both challenges and opportunities for curriculum renewal in many countries. It also created opportunities for countries and institutions in Africa and South Africa in particular for co-operative and comparative curriculum inquiry.

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- Inquiry into postgraduate curricula became prominent as postgraduate qualifications increasingly started playing an important role in knowledge-based economies.

Evidence from South Africa points to a number of important developments concerning documented curriculum inquiry in higher education – particularly since the 1970s. Three identifiable periods emerged: namely a period before the election of the first democratic government in the country, the one directly following that, and the period after around 2000. A few highlights from these periods of inquiry might suffice.

Curriculum inquiry in higher education in the period before 1990 appears to have been dominated by technical-rational and pragmatic approaches and practices. Obviously, the racially based policies of apartheid, which manifested in separate higher education systems and institutions in South Africa during the time, caused much room for contestation, debate and inquiry into the legitimacy and feasibility of both these policies and the curricula that accompanied them. When the restrictions prohibiting universities from allowing students from all races into their learning programmes were partially lifted, another problem, namely that of huge numbers of educationally unprepared and under-prepared students, was imminent. This caused universities to take additional and even extraordinary measures towards student academic development, student learning support and adapting or amending curricula (see Scott 2009). Groupings of mostly 'liberal' higher educationists established forums to debate and inquire into current curricula, but there seems to be little documented evidence of theoretical inquiry – particularly concerning inquiry methodology. Published records mainly reflected 'how to' curriculum issues rather than issues concerning the 'why' of curricula. This was mainly true for the Afrikaans language university campuses where high quality materials and manuals were developed to guide and support academics in enhancing their curricula and their teaching practices.

The period covering the early 1990s saw a highly politicised curriculum inquiry environment in South Africa which preceded the 1994 elections. After the first democratically elected government took office in 1994, a series of higher education policy initiatives, documents and debates materialised while outcomes-based education (OBE) became the ideological driving force or philosophy which represented change and transformation in higher education curricula. This was accompanied by the mode 1-mode 2 knowledge debates, questions about the place and role of indigenous knowledge, the whole qualifications or unit standards debate (heavily influenced by trade unions and the skills training sector) and the end of the binary (university-technikon) divide. There is documented evidence that these debates and issues caused inquiry into higher education curricula, but less so than one would have expected.

Since 2000 there has been evidence of a proliferation of literature on curriculum inquiry, mainly sparked by the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) towards the end of the previous decade and its higher education extension, the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF). Issues such as globalisation, knowledge-based economies, massification, curriculum responsiveness to national and

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local needs, education for democracy, information and communication technologies, institutional mergers, quality assurance measures (programme reviews and institutional quality audits), public accountability and academic freedom all played their part in more recent curriculum inquiry.

What are the implications of all of this information for those researchers and academics who are interested in curriculum research and inquiry in higher education in South Africa? Three possible implications might be highlighted. *Firstly*, it seems important to take notice of what has been done and published on curriculum inquiry – not only in South African higher education, but also in higher education internationally and in the schooling sector. Why is this important? In my opinion the reason is two-fold: to avoid ‘re-inventing the wheel’ and to learn from others’ research and experience. Sometimes curriculum researchers and lecturers are of the opinion that the questions and problems they or their curricula face are unique. Mostly this seems not to be true as their contexts and circumstances might be unique, but much can be learnt – both about the nature of the problem and the methodology followed – in order to inquire local curriculum challenges. Therefore, those who inquire into curricula should be well read in the field. Sadly, however, some academics and lecturers are under the impression that they know how to inquire into curricula merely by teaching a subject or a course for years or decades.

Secondly, co-operation and networking in curriculum inquiry seems essential. This rings true not only for working together and creating networks within subjects and fields of learning but also for co-operating across disciplines, professional fields and expertise. Inquiring into curricula or elements of curricula in inter- or trans-disciplinary teams makes much sense as new ideas on appropriate methodologies, lines of inquiry and curriculum issues usually emerge from such co-operative teams. If I may illustrate with one example: Recently an exercise was initiated at my university to inquire into a new learning assessment policy for the institution. The team that attempted the inquiry came from at least eight different disciplinary backgrounds in the university and involved teaching and learning support staff. During this project it became abundantly clear that the multiplicity of views, experiences and tacit knowledge about assessment hugely enriched the process and generated new angles on assessment not written up in educational literature. Most participants completed the project with much richer perspectives on the issue of learning assessment and made several changes to their own assessment practices accordingly.

Thirdly, the development of an agenda for curriculum inquiry also seems important. Some excellent work has been done in various aspects of curriculum inquiry in higher education in South Africa, but it seems that priority setting and focus are currently lacking. With an apparent emphasis on higher education curriculum responsiveness to national and international development goals, increases in student participation rates and pressures on institutions for student access, under-prepared entrants, economic challenges (almost worldwide), alignment issues (in view of the implementation of the

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HEQF), curriculum quality and other issues, there seems to be an overwhelming range of issues for research and inquiry. It may be time for some form of prioritisation of these issues as not all of them can be addressed simultaneously – particularly at the institutional and programmatic levels of inquiry. Priorities will of course differ from the national to the institutional to the programmatic or the single course, but setting an agenda for research and inquiry remains important – not only to prevent duplication and overload but also to allocate resources for inquiry wisely.

In conclusion: In their book *Engaging the curriculum in higher education* Barnett and Coate (2005:159) refer to the ‘scholarship of the curriculum’ which is different from the scholarship of teaching and learning. To them the scholarship of the curriculum implies, for one, a more reflective inclination towards curriculum matters: ‘[T]here can be no side-stepping engagement in deliberate, incisive and collective reflection on curriculum matters if well-founded but imaginative offerings are to be forthcoming’ (Barnett & Coate 2005:159). It is in this spirit that curriculum inquiry seems to be an essential rather than an optional scholarly activity in higher education – one to which this book aims to make some contribution.

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